

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ

The Rapture and Revelation, One And The Same

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Jesus is Coming Again

The belief that the once-crucified and now-resurrected Jesus is coming again is essential to the Christian faith. The inspired Apostle wrote, “if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins...’ if we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:16-17, 19 NASB) Every person who holds true saving faith in Christ is awaiting the return of Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is now exalted to the throne of His Father and ours. As the angelic messengers declared at our Lord’s ascension, “This same Jesus, this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Jesus’ coming again is our “blessed hope,” our very foundation for anticipating everlasting joy. Without the hope of the future resurrection, we have no gospel hope at all. But God's people do indeed possess the good hope of the gospel through grace, with good reason. The Christ who died upon the accursed tree for His own was triumphantly raised from the dead by the power of God, by the same quickening power which we experienced in our new birth and will yet experience in the resurrection at “the last day.”

The Rage of the Age

All true Christians await the second coming of Jesus with great joy and expectation. However, no other segment of Bible scholarship has recently been more exposed to confusion and manipulation than this very important teaching of Jesus’ coming again. Some have taken a novel approach when it comes to this matter and have fabricated a sensational system of elaborate charts and graphs to explain their complicated views, largely constructed of little more than dreams, imaginings, and thin air. Here, we refer to the rage of the age, dispensational premillennialism. This is the system taught by many who have patterned their thinking after the editorial notes of the Scofield Reference Bible (1909), following the scheme previously developed by John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren assemblies. We should take note that nothing even remotely akin to this system of thinking existed in all of church history prior to its development in the early to middle 1800's, when it seemed to appear in seed form at least in the ministry of Edward Irving and the church he led. Despite its having no basis in historic Christianity, dispensational premillennialism has become the predominant eschatological perspective of a large segment of evangelical Christianity in the 21st century. It remains a relative newcomer, being less than 200 years old, but continues to enjoy a large and growing following.

Along with the Scofield Bible, many have carefully studied the series of elaborate charts by Clarence Larkin, a once-prominent dispensational thinker, displaying a timeline from eternity past to eternity future, having seven dispensations (eras) of human history from before the beginning to the onset of the eternal state. The result of these ‘studies’ and an overactive imagination has been a delightful, horrifying, sensational confusion of the whole matter. After a while, the Scriptures themselves fade into fond memory while charts and editorial notes assume a life of their own. Other speculative charts exist

which further muddy the waters, including an image depicting of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the Seventy Weeks prophecy of Daniel 9.

The fact remains: the increasingly popular view known as dispensationalism stands on a foundation of speculation, not on the clear teaching of the Bible. While claiming to interpret the Bible literally, proponents of the dispensational paradigm are required to selectively interpret Holy Scripture. As literal when certain phrases or verses are supportive of the system; and then, when figurative, spiritualizing interpretations best serve the scheme, a literal interpretation is, shall we say, 'left behind;' at least momentarily. Dispensationalists hardly agree among themselves; variations on the theme are virtually endless. Despite "inside the camp" incompatibility on certain important features, dispensational premillennialism has still managed to, in many cases and in many places, become the most necessary test of fellowship. Some churches define their very existence by this debatable set of doctrines. Anyone who dares to disagree with their views on eschatology is often regarded as a poor student of Scripture. While possibly regarded as a fellow-saint, in dispensationalist circles the principled non-dispensationalist is often regarded as one who handles the precious Word of God deceitfully, liberally, or incompetently.

Our Approach to This Matter

Setting straw men ablaze may be a delight from time to time, since almost everyone likes a harmless bonfire at someone else's expense. But, to the degree possible, let us approach this matter so as to get some profit to our souls. By advancing the truth of God's Word, we shall defeat error and the untruth which might otherwise plague our thinking and make us dull. Let us be willing to learn and to become ever-sharper instruments in God's hand. We must not cling to untruth for even one second after we learn better. Holding error after we learn truth is like striking our blade into the dirt over and again—the more we do this, the duller we become. We must determine something better for our souls. Let us go on the offensive to glorify God, buying the truth and selling it not; laying hold on God's truth at all costs, refusing to part with it at any price.

Does the Bible Teach "A Secret Rapture?"

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." (1Thessalonians 4:16-17 KJV)

Some suggest that the event described by these words is a secret rapture, a catching away, in which only believers are resurrected, with the rest of surviving humanity left to face tribulation and great tribulation. Several years later, it is taught that Jesus will actually come again in the promised Second Coming. During the interval between stage one and stage two of the Second Coming, the secretly raptured church would be with Jesus in heaven where they would undergo judgment, etc. It is often pointed out that this portion of Scripture does not mention the unbelieving or Christ actually setting His feet on the earth. It is therefore said that this could not be the second coming of Christ in His glory, for at His second coming Jesus will come to the earth, setting His feet on earth. Sound interesting? Is the point of distinction valid or merely imaginative? Is it true? Is this a fair treatment of this passage? Does the passage intend to say anything about a stealthy, quiet coming of Jesus? Look again at the passage.

In order to inform the Thessalonian believers, Paul set forth this teaching: "the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up with them..." It is apparent that some believers were uninformed as to the future state of the believing dead. What would become of those who had trusted Christ, but who had died prior to Jesus' second coming? It is clear from the tenor of Paul's

words that some had begun to mourn the loss of their brethren to death. Their mourning may have been with an overwhelming grief, like the grieving of those who bury their dead with no hope of ever seeing them again.

Paul's purpose in writing was to comfort, strengthen, the Lord's people concerning their dead and dying brethren. There is no mention of the unbelieving since Paul was writing to living believers about their fellow-believers who had fallen "asleep in Jesus." This portion speaks of Christ's coming from a Christian's point of view and what Jesus' Second Coming will mean to believers, whether physically living or dead. Paul wrote as an apostle to establish a basis in revealed truth for the Christian's comfort. Now that these words have been transmitted to us, no gospel-believing person has right or reason to grieve over their dead loved ones who have trusted Jesus as the hopeless world grieves over its dead. When we grieve over a brother or sister who has died, our grief is greatly eased by our certain hope of future resurrection at the Second Coming of our Lord. We shall meet again when Christ gathers all of His people unto Himself at His appearing.

The concept of a secret rapture is not well-founded upon Holy Scripture. Legend has it that this whole idea sprang from a British woman's dream, a vision which was considered to bear the authority of inspired revelation (might this be an early precursor of the modern charismatic movement?). The secret coming vision was regarded by Minister Edward Irving, then was more fully developed by John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren, and later by the American, C. I. Scofield. Dispensationalists often appeal to this Thessalonians passage to advance the secret rapture theory, but the passage is not very cooperative with their purpose.

There is nothing secret about the "parousia," the presence, appearing, coming of Christ, described here. Look closely and you will see for yourself. If we hoped to keep something as a secret, why would we go shouting, speaking with a loud voice, and blowing a trumpet? Well, these are the very things Paul associates with Christ's Parousia, the coming of the Lord described in I Thessalonians 4:15-17. "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God..." May we reasonably imagine that this Savior's shout, archangel voice, and God's trumpet will be heard only by Christians? To make the passage say that would be to import something into the text which is simply not present. The Apostle indicates that Christ's parousia will be no secret anything—it will be attended by shout, angel voice, and trumpet. Despite what we may not know, we may be assured that the Parousia will be a noisy event, incapable of being ignored by the entire world, according to this passage.

No secret rapture is taught here or elsewhere in Scripture. This passage speaks of Christ's Second Coming and what it will mean for God's believing people, living and dead. When will it take place? When do we who are believers expect to be raised unto glory? What will occur in earthly history after this Second Coming, this parousia, of Jesus? These good questions are met with simple answers, if only we can believe the words of our Lord Jesus Christ on the subject. Look to the Gospel according to John.

A Mathematician's Dream Come True

Math problems are sometimes hard to solve. Add this, divide that, take the square root of something, multiply by fourteen and a half, and then enjoy a slice of π . But some equations are so simple. Two plus two equals four. As good Bible students, we can add two plus two. Sometimes we must realize that the Lord has given us the answer in the Book, no calculator needed. This is one of those times.

In His teaching, Jesus told believers when to expect to be raised up in glory. Here is the mathematical portion of this study.

“And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at **the last day.**” (John 6:39-40 KJV)

This is an important passage for those who profess to interpret the Bible literally. Jesus promised to raise up the entire body of the saved “at the last day.” Now, the question to be answered is this: how many days will follow “the last day?” If our resurrection to be with Jesus occurs “at the last day,” then where is there room to squeeze in seven years of this and then another thousand years of that afterwards? Now, some tell us that Jesus’ words “at the last day” really mean something other than “at the last day,” as if He was speaking in religious code. It is common to hear dispensationalists say that phrases like “the day of the Lord,” and “the day of Christ,” and “the coming of the Lord,” all refer to different times and seasons. But not so. All those references speak of one and the same event, the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus, which He promised would occur “at the last day.”

Over and again, Jesus promised to raise up believers “at the last day.” So, how is it that some tell us that only a certain segment of God's people will be raised up a good while prior to “the last day?” Jesus declared that He will raise up all who believe in Him "at the last day." We should believe His words, since He speaks truth and simplicity to our minds.

The day when Jesus comes again will be “the last day” of earthly history as we have come to know it. That day will be followed only by an endless eternity, the new heavens and the redeemed earth. Tribulation and suffering will be past, the last enemy will have been defeated, and every elect sinner will have been effectually called into saving union with God through Jesus Christ. That Resurrection Day will announce the Final Judgment of all mankind. Please consider Jesus’ words from John 5.

Two Resurrections? Let's Talk About This

Indeed, there are two resurrections in the context of John 5. But it is not as some have suggested. It is not one resurrection of the saved and another separate resurrection of the wicked. It is not one judgment seat of Christ and another separate great white throne judgment. Those designations refer to one and the same judgment, from differing perspectives, emphasizing different specifics relating to different classes: the saved and the wicked.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.” (John 5:24-25)

This first resurrection here mentioned is a spiritual resurrection of those who are spiritually dead unto eternal life through faith in the Lord Jesus. The new birth, the birth from above, regeneration by the Spirit, is a real and genuine resurrection; a resurrection of a spiritually dead sinner to spiritual and eternal life in Christ. This is the first of two resurrections in the broader passage. One down, one to go! Now remember that Jesus is asserting His co-equal authority with the Father, to give life to the dead as He pleases.

Jesus then spoke of another resurrection which was future from the time when He was speaking. He referred to an hour when all who were dead would be summoned to come before Him. Whereas the “hour” mentioned before clearly referred to a very lengthy era which had already begun, an era during

which many sinners would be saved, one by one; much like we might speak of the hour coming when computers are used in almost every aspect of life, and we would further say that that hour has already come. By this we mean that something is a present reality. Jesus indicated that the reality of spiritually dead sinners being raised to eternal life through the power of God was already a reality to be grasped. He would essentially say “The time of this happening is now!” But this next use of the word “hour” in the John 5 passage announces something which will, when that hour arrives, involve all who are in the graves, both the righteous and the wicked. This latter hour will obviously not be centuries long, but will, when it commences, immediately involve all who have died whether saved or unconverted. Note the words of Jesus as He announces a coming general resurrection of all who are in the graves:

“Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” (John 5:28-29)

This hour of which Jesus spoke is one hour, essentially one time, when all that are in the graves shall hear His voice. The “all” of this verse clearly includes the righteous and the unrighteous, the saved and the unsaved. What is described here is a general resurrection, in which all mankind will be raised and summoned to Judgment when that hour arrives. Distinctions are here made between the righteous and the wicked, with the righteous enjoying life eternal, the wicked facing everlasting condemnation. And please take note that all of this is to occur at once when that particular hour arrives.

The concept of exclusive resurrections, first of the saved and then of the wicked, or vice versa, is simply not taught in the Bible. The Day of Resurrection is biblically connected with the Day of Judgment, in that one follows the other. It is even likely that we should understand them to be synonymous and co-terminous, one Day of resurrection and judgment, “the last day.” Further, the judgment of that Day is also general in nature, with the saved and the unsaved present, all individually answering to God.

It is perfectly reasonable and entirely biblical to believe in the general resurrection and general judgment of mankind. This general resurrection and general judgment will come at “the last day.” There is no need whatsoever to refute the two-stage Second Coming theory of the dispensationalist. The dispensational theory of a two-stage Second Coming is unworthy of being believed in light of John 5. Now briefly consider Matthew 25.

The General Judgment of Matthew 25

“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ... Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” ... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.” (Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46)

Now, at the very outset any dispensationalist worth his salt would accuse us of failing to “rightly divide the word of truth,” with emphasis on “divide.” We will need the Authorized Dispensational Handbook to tell us precisely into which pigeon-hole this Scripture must be isolated. Dispensational thinkers refer to this passage as describing ‘The Judgment of the Nations,’ saying that this Scripture has nothing to do with the judgment of individuals. Rather, if only we would “rightly divided the word” here and had the first morsel of common interpretive sense, we would conclude that this Scripture speaks of a separate

judgment of Gentile nations, based on how each of the various nations behaved themselves in relation to the ancient and modern nation Israel, “the least of these my brethren.” Please look to the passage itself.

First, observe that the gathering of all nations includes Israel with the rest. There is no contextual or exegetical reason to interpret *ethnos*, nations, to mean every nation except Israel. While the word could possibly be used that way, there is no compelling reason to interpret it that way every time it is used. And very clearly, “all nations” can properly be understood to include Israel. Some from national Israel over the centuries will be among the Lord's sheep and be set on His right; the Apostles, the Jerusalem church, and the 3000 plus who were converted on that notable Pentecost day. Some of Israel will surely be set on the Lord's left hand, goats for certain, unbelieving and unrepentant.

Secondly, we should quickly acknowledge that there is no such thing as a “sheep nation” or “goat nation.” Jesus gave His life for men out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation. Some of all nations will be saved by God's grace. It would be impossible for entire nations to be cast into hell's everlasting punishment without casting in certain ones who are redeemed, converted people. The word ‘nations’ must be understood to refer to all individuals of all the various nations of the earth, and from all the ages of human history. After all, that's what nations are, citizens, people! These, all, will be brought before the throne of the Lamb to be judged. And this judgment will be a righteous judgment of individuals, not a collective judgment based on appearances or on the political wrangling of the nation's various former leaders.

Neither America, England, Japan, nor Luxembourg will be collectively judged as righteous for having political policies showing excessive favor to the modern nation of Israel. While it is certain that God judges whole societies with temporal judgments because of cultural sins, no nation will be corporately judged regarding the state of its citizens' souls in “the last day.” The whole concept of a national judgment, binding entire nations hand and foot and casting them into a never-ending hell, has sprang from the system of dispensationalism, not from the Bible.

Each person from every nation, existing or extinct, will be judged by Jesus Christ in the day appointed by God. But that judgment will be intensely personal, not political or collective. Sheep are sheep and goats are goats, individually. Like a flock of beloved sheep, those who belong to Jesus Christ will enter the heaven for which they have longed. The wicked, likened unto goats, will be separated from the Lord's sheep and committed into that hell they cared not to escape, though they heard the glad tidings of the gospel often proclaimed. But sheep nations? Goat nations? No.

Matthew 25 tells of the general judgment which is to occur in connection with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. He will occupy His glorious throne, not an earthly Davidic throne, but the Heavenly throne, of which the Davidic throne was a typical foreshadowing. See Acts 2:30-31, where Christ's resurrection from the dead is declared to be the fulfillment of the prophecy that Christ would occupy David's throne. All people of all nations from all times will be present, including Israelites of all ages. Men will be separated from men, as sheep are separated from goats. The people of God, who have lived under the gracious influences of His saving mercies and have believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, will be admitted to the glorious heavenly kingdom. The wicked who lived with little or no regard for law or gospel, refusing the mercies of God, spurning His Beloved Son who died and rose again, “these shall go away into everlasting punishment.”

The two categories of sinners present, believers and unbelievers, will be distinguished by their works. The righteous shall have borne good fruit, but the wicked shall have remained true to their dark hearts,

producing evil fruit. And when did the righteous and the wicked treat Christ any way at all, or produce good or evil works which displayed the respective states of their hearts? When they treated their fellowmen, and especially the believing people of God, as they did; either good or bad in the course of everyday life! Indeed, “by their fruits you shall know them!” “The last day” will declare the truth about us all, whether or not we are genuine believers or vain talkers.

There are numerous other passages which insist that the great Day will feature a general judgment of all men. The idea that “the judgment seat of Christ” and “the Great White Throne” refer to different judgments is biblically unfounded; the single hair finely split remains a single hair. These expressions speak of the same judgment and of the same Day. Fallen angels will also be judged and are even now “reserved unto judgment.” Simon Peter writes of “the day of judgment.” Paul also uses the same language, referring to “the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel” (Romans 2:16). When such words were penned, Paul spoke of the righteous and the wicked in the same breath.

If we are willing to grant any weight at all to the words of Scripture, we will soon reject dispensational premillennialism for what it is, a fantasy, not a system of Bible doctrine. But let us be careful that we do not reject those who have embraced an unbiblical system. No one but the Adversary of souls succeeds when we are unloving toward true brethren, even though we may strongly differ with them. But we differ for cause and not for a desire to be different. It is not biblical scholarship which advances what God's Word does not teach. It is amazing to realize how many otherwise-sound Bible teachers have devoted themselves to an unbiblical doctrine of last things.

What Difference Does It Make?

It does matter what we believe about our Lord's Second Coming. Truth matters always. It is not unreasonable to want to know and teach the truth about this aspect of our faith, and we are not too dogmatic to assert what we know the Bible clearly sets forth. So, we do no wrong to seriously desire to learn and adopt the Scripture's teaching on this matter, and then to declare the truth as it is in Jesus.

It is not rare to hear warnings like, “You had better get saved. You don't want to be left behind during the reign of the Antichrist, do you?” In essence, men are told to dread the devil and his henchman, that they should come to Jesus in order to escape the untold sorrows that are coming on the earth. But is this approach to evangelism faithful to the commission we were given?! In a word, no!

That emphasis is not harmonious with the Bible's witness. And even worse, the lying impression is created that a sinner has the power to “get himself saved,” and we know from the Bible that sinners are spiritually “dead in sins.”

The Christian gospel tells man that he must obey the gospel through faith and repentance because he is a captive of sin and will finally face God in judgment. Unless one has Jesus as his Savior and Lord, he has no covering for his sins. Apart from Christ, a sinner is destined to remain captive to sin and condemnation. Prepare to meet God! Do not fear those who can destroy the body, but after that can do nothing more; rather, fear the living God who can destroy both body and soul in hell! This is Jesus' teaching. Fear God!

Dispensationalism would have us to warn sinners about an earthly bad time to come. The gospel would have us to warn sinners to flee the wrath of God that is coming upon the unbelieving sinner's soul at the last day. What a difference in emphasis, indeed!

Say What?

There is also the matter of confusion. Has anyone thus far met a card-carrying dispensationalist who was neither confused nor confusing? We all are undone if he should misplace his charts! Disputes about eschatology are most efficient at confusing precious believers, especially lambs young and tender in the gospel faith. The young believer sees his first dispensational chart and realizes that he will never understand all those complicated teachings without a great deal of help. At that point, he is adequately confused, but is terribly impressed with the fellow who can recite what is on the chart without looking.

The tender believer may think it is a giant intellect, an accomplished theologian who can read 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and come away believing in a secret rapture. The young convert would never have seen it. Why? Because he is inexperienced and unlearned? He can find no secret rapture in the text and is troubled by his inability. The young believer has not the confidence to believe his own eyes when he sees no secret rapture. No secret rapture, no judgment of sheep nations and goat nations, no list of other judgments, no handful of resurrections to decipher. In this case, the uncomplicated perspective of the inexperienced student provides a clearer sight of the truth.

Confusion and error hold sway where the Word of God is blatantly misused. Dear soul, our Lord will come in the appointed time and His coming will occur in an instant, like “a thief in the night.” When He comes, all men will be summoned to the judgment of the great Day. Earth as we know it will pass away, along with the present heavens. The saved will experience everlasting joy in the presence of the Lord, while the unbelieving will go away into the eternal punishment which awaits them. And since all these things, this whole earth and all it contains, are destined to be consumed in the fires of God's righteousness, what kind of people should we be (2 Peter 3)? We would do well to focus on being prepared to meet the Lord Jesus in peace, making our “calling and election sure,” being certain we are truly in Christ by faith and not false brethren, vain talkers who know not the Lord.

Until He comes, our Sovereign Lord Christ Jesus is saving His people, one by one. “If any man is athirst,” Jesus says to that man, “let him come to Me and drink.” Thirsty soul, come to the waters and come today! Jesus the Lord will satisfy your soul. “The last day” is surely nearer than we think. It most certainly is. Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ who is coming again?

Post Script: It is almost certain that any who have thus far held to dispensational premillennialism will have questions and objections not at all addressed by this sermon. Only consider the validity of what has been stated, fully consistent with the Bible's language; study the matters further. More light is needed by us all; it is the nature of growth in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. He gives light to His beloved and confounds the darkness. Call upon Him, for He grants wisdom. May the Lord bless as we search for abiding wealth from His Word!
